

Writing Spaces Assignments & Activities Archive

“Upstream” and “Lateral” Moves Through Information Networks

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Overview

Recent widespread concern over the spread of misinformation and disinformation has placed a renewed emphasis on information literacy skills in FYC courses. Traditional approaches often draw on student skepticism, asking them to analyze the credibility of a single source. But such skepticism-laden approaches risk adding to our moment of epistemic destabilization because they misread our current information ecosystem. As media studies scholar Danah Boyd has put it: “We are not living in a crisis of what is true. We are living in a crisis of how we know what is true” (2018). A recent report by Project Information Literacy found that 36% of students don’t trust *any* new source (Head et al. 2020). In such an environment, common “checklist approaches,” like the C.R.A.A.P. test, can increase skepticism about *all* composed knowledge (Toth and McClure 2016). Instead, recent scholarship on information literacy points to the need for a more rhetorically-influenced approach—to teach students how to navigate complex “socio-cognitive networks” of information by equipping them with abilities to follow “source trails” in order to understand how knowledge is composed and circulated within complex networked environments (Miller and Leon 2018; Laskin and Haller 2016).

Drawing on research by the Stanford History Education Group, Mike Caulfield has provided a compelling framework for understanding the complexities of information ecosystems (Wineburg and McGrew 2019; Caulfield 2017). The Stanford study compared the fact-checking strategies of professional journalists and high school students finding that professionals were much more likely to understand that information exists in a network. And they made use of the networked aspect of digital

discourse to make two “moves” through this network. The first move they termed “going upstream” to examine the sources the original source cites. The second move was to examine the sources “laterally,” that is, to compare the information in the original source with other sources on the same topic. With these strategies, students have a framework to assemble or “map” a network of sources, effectively navigate this network, and make decisions about the strength of information in this network. They grapple with the complexities and contradictions of information in different source types written for different purposes and for different audiences.

This activity takes such a rhetorical approach to information literacy through crowdsourced student analysis of the information in opinionated news sources. In it, students find that our current information ecosystem is dynamic and complex; yet they gain experience in navigating networks, and reflect on the current realities of the production and circulation of information.

Time Commitment

1-2 class sessions f2f, or 2-3 class modules asynchronous online

Materials

Materials required include devices with internet access for all students, as well as access to Google Docs or a collaborative annotation tool.

Activity Process

- Instructor selects 3-4 recent opinion pieces from a major news publication. Because many news organizations have paywalls, it is best to transfer the text, images, and hyperlinks into a shared, editable, Google Doc.
- Students, in groups, select one opinion article of interest. Each student provides 3-4 annotations, using the Google Docs “comment” function, on the article focusing on

rhetorical analysis (e.g. rhetorical situation, genre conventions, rhetorical strategies, etc.).

- Next, in the same groups and on the same document, students identify and “fact check” claims in the article, following source trails by making upstream moves, and performing additional research to make lateral moves. Each student makes 3-4 annotations describing the networked sources and whether they verify the original claims; students may also respond to or elaborate on other students’ annotations.
- Then, each student individually writes a short “recommendation” to the group about whether the piece should have been published, revised, or rejected, by the news organization, drawing on the crowdsourced annotations.
- Finally, the group discusses and collectively decides whether the piece should have been published, providing their response and reasoning to the instructor.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Gain an understanding of navigating information in networked environments: following source trails, practicing “going upstream,” and employing “lateral” moves
- Think critically about the complexities of information in a networked environment
- Gain an understanding of how facts are used rhetorically in either ethical or manipulative ways
- Apply rhetorical concepts and terminology

Learning Accommodations

- Materials should be presented in a way to allow easy annotation and paywall-free access to sources.

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